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## THE PROPHETIC ACTIVITY OF JESUS.

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THE words recorded of Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15, 18, concerning the prophet which Jehovah would raise up for Israel from among their brethren, were doubtless fulfilled first in Samuel, and in the long list of spiritual leaders which God gave to his people. But this Mosaic promise had its ultimate realization only in Jesus Christ; as indeed he filled out and exemplified all that was best in the spirit life of ancient Israel.

That Jesus was conscious of his prophetic functions seems clear. At Nazareth, near the beginning of his ministry, when leading the sabbath service in the synagogue, he read this passage from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor; he hath sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18 f.). The words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," are a very common expression for a prophet's call and preparation (*cf.* Ezek. 2:2; 11:5; Isa. 59:21; Joel 2:28 f.; Dan. 4:18). Preaching, proclaiming, and at times miracle-working were prophetic functions. And Jesus said, "Today hath this Scripture been fulfilled in your ears" (vs. 21). When rejected by his townsmen he said, "No prophet is acceptable in his own country" (vs. 24). Later he gave as a reason for pressing forward through dangers: "It is not possible for a prophet to perish out of Jerusalem" (Luke 13:33). Our Lord's favorite name for himself was taken from the oft-repeated appellation of the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel, "Son of man." That the people generally recognized Jesus as a prophet is manifest (Luke 7:16; 9:8; 24:19; Mark 6:15; 8:28; John 4:19; 6:14; 7:40, 52; 9:17; Matt. 16:14; 21:46). That this view was in accordance with the Father's idea of the Son's mission is seen in the vision on the Mount of Transfiguration, where Elijah is present as representative of the

prophets, as well as Moses the giver of the Law. Jesus was to fulfil both the legal and the prophetic ideals of Israel. This interpretation of God's purposes in sending Jesus was presented by Peter in the temple after the resurrection, and he added: "Every soul that shall not hearken to that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people" (Acts 3:22-24). In the long line of development of prophetic teaching Jesus stands at the point of culmination. He came not to destroy the prophets, but to fulfil (Matt. 5:17). A study of the life of Jesus shows at once the essential functions of the ancient prophet and also the spirit and method of the prophet.

The Hebrew prophet was first a seer and then a speaker. Indeed, the two most common Hebrew words used of him, *ro'eh* and *nābhî*, (*cf.* 1 Sam. 9:9) are suggestive of the two most important characteristics of the prophet; at one time the chief emphasis being upon the vision, at another upon the proclamation. The prophet must first see divine truth, and then he must speak it out as a message from heaven. There then were the two foci of the ellipse which made up the prophet's life.

As a seer of truth our Lord's vision was clear and immediate. He knew the Father (John 8:15; 17:25), and said he did only what he saw the Father do (John 5:20). That is, Jesus always claimed to receive his message from heaven, saying to the unbelieving Jews concerning himself: "He that willeth to do his will shall know of the teaching, whether it be of God or whether I speak of myself" (John 7:17). Further, "He who is of God, he hath seen the Father" (John 6:46; 10:15). Jesus was a seer also in the narrower sense. He saw Nathaniel under the fig tree (John 1:48); told the Samaritan woman "all that ever she did" (4:39); for "he knew what was in man" (2:25). Insight into human affairs, partial at least, was a characteristic of the ancient seer (*cf.* 1 Sam. 9:5-10).

It is a noteworthy fact, however, that Jesus never attributed his knowledge of divine truth, nor rested the validity of his message, upon his having had a dream or vision. This the Hebrew prophets often did. Christ's vision was immediate. His marvelous revelations of divine truth seem to come forth in his calmest moments, rather than under any lightening influence of ecstasy. The old prophets said, "I have dreamed," or, "Lo, a vision;" Christ exclaimed, "Verily, verily I say."

Jesus was also a *nābhî*. He recognized himself as a messenger of God to man. A prophet was one who stood before man on behalf of God. He was a spokesman. The favorite expression concerning this beginning of a prophet's work was, "The word of the Lord came."<sup>1</sup> John the evangelist tells us that Jesus was the word of God that came, and tabernacled among us—the divine Word, made flesh. He spoke for God the words of life. As "no man hath seen God at any time," "the only begotten Son," "he hath declared him" (John 1:1, 14, 18). And again he said: "I speak that I have seen with my father" (8:38; *c.f.* 8:28, 40; 12:49, 50). As a speaker of divine things he greatly impressed even his enemies: "Never man so spake" (7:46). The writer to the Hebrews interprets correctly when he says: "God having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son" (Heb. 1:1).

So also the subject-matter of his teaching was in perfect accord with the great themes of the Hebrew prophets—righteousness in the widest and deepest sense of that term (Matt. 3:15; 5:6; 6:33), and the Kingdom of God in its most spiritual significance. It is true, he said relatively less about the King, the Messiah, and more concerning the principles and the citizens of the kingdom, than did the prophets; but the subject was the same: "Seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33). Indeed, he began his ministry by taking up the message which the last of the prophets, John, the Forerunner, had laid down, saying: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (*c.f.* Mark 1:15). He went about in the synagogues "preaching the gospel of the kingdom" (Matt. 4:23; 9:35). This was the one constant theme of his preaching: the nature, principles, subjects, and consummation of his kingdom.<sup>2</sup> He taught his disciples to preach the same theme, and to pray, "Thy kingdom come."

The method of Jesus was frequently identical with that of the early prophets. First, he spoke "with authority" (Matt. 7:29). This, we are informed, was in marked contrast with the method of the scribes (Mark 1:22), who quoted authorities. For about four

<sup>1</sup> Jer. 18:1; 25:1; 26:1; 27:1; Ezek. 12:8; 20:2; Dan. 9:2; Hos. 1:1; Joel 1:1; Mic. 1:1; Zeph. 1:1; Hag. 1:1; Zech. 1:1.

<sup>2</sup> *Cf.* Matt., chap. 13; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:1; 18:17; John 3:3; 18:36, etc.

centuries the prophetic spirit and method had yielded to the method and spirit of the scribe, whose stock in trade was a reproduction of the opinions of the earlier rabbis. Jesus restored the method of the prophet who spoke forth directly the message with which God had immediately intrusted him. A prophet was an envoy extraordinary and a minister plenipotentiary. So Jesus spoke for God with directness and power.

The use of historical events was a common prophetic method. Jesus made use of the past history of the people to enforce religious lessons, as did the prophet: Noah and the flood, the patriarch Abraham, Sodom and Gomorrah, Moses and the uplifted serpent, David and the shewbread, Solomon and his rich apparel, the Queen of Sheba, Jonah and the big fish. These and other Old Testament narratives of past history are used to enforce his teachings. Those upon whom the tower of Siloam fell, and they whose blood Pilate mingled with the sacrifices (Luke 13:1) were among the more recent events referred to by Jesus to enforce religious lessons.

Current events and circumstances were also used by our Lord, as did the prophets, to enforce their message. The prevailing sins of the day were exposed; he uttered woe upon the wicked cities; current theories of scribes and Pharisees were combated; the life and death of John the Baptist (Luke 7:20 ff.) were interpreted. Innumerable situations became the starting-point for sermons. The woman at the well (John, chap. 4), the feeding of a hungry multitude (John, chap. 6), the anointing at the Pharisee's house (Luke 7:36-50), the visit of the Greeks (John 12:20-36), and many similar incidents became texts for discourses.

In other words, Jesus, as were the prophets, was one who manifestly regarded himself as a part of his own age. He was just as intent upon saving his own generation by their acceptance of him and his teaching as though there were no others to come after.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus' habit of making use of the present situation and turning it to spiritual account would sometimes become sensational, as when at the Feast of the Tabernacles, "on the great day of the feast," water being used in celebrating the wilderness experience of Israel (symbolic of the thirst of their fathers and the gushing water from the smitten

<sup>3</sup> Matt. 11:16; 12:39 ff.; 16:4; 17:7; Luke 9:41; 21:32.

rock), throngs of onlooking worshipers heard a voice lifted up above the din of the multitude saying: "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink" (John 7:37). Like the ancient prophets, speaking as did both they and he to an unspiritual, dull generation, Jesus did not shrink from striking and unusual methods of speech and action, that men might stop and listen, and mend their doings. The prophet at times also looked forward into the future. So Jesus was a *fore-teller* as well as a *forthteller*. He foretold his own rejection, betrayal, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension (John 6:70; Luke 9:22; John 6:62). He foretold the coming of the Spirit, and the persecutions that should overtake his disciples (John, chap. 16). But the prophetic eye of the Master several times took a yet wider sweep, and gave a panorama of coming events in the destruction of Jerusalem, and of the end of the world (Matt., chap. 24). These predictions, like those of the prophets, were not in definite outline (Matt. 24:36). Nor is the coming overthrow of the Holy City clearly distinguished from the final judgment of the world; but just as the prophets would often throw upon the flat surface of the same canvas events which were to be separated by centuries, so did Jesus. In common with the prophets Jesus' chief work was not that of prediction. Like them, however, Jesus turned the eyes and hearts of the people from the present, full of sin and loss, toward a glorious future. The best was yet to be (Matt. 25:31). The Son of man was yet to come in his glory (Luke 21:27). He would send another, to guide into all the truth (John 16:13). The prophets were all optimists, and Jesus was the very incarnation of Hope.

The spirit of the Hebrew prophet was clearly marked in Jesus. The divine-human enthusiasm of the ancient religious leaders was emphatic in the Nazarene. The two incidents of the cleansing of the temple, one at the beginning of the early Judean ministry (John 2:14) and the other during his final visit to the Holy City (Matt. 21:12), were thoroughly characteristic of the severe spirit of the prophets. The evangelist clearly discerns this in quoting from the Psalmist the words, as finding a fulfilment, "The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up" (Psalm 69:9). One day, preaching in Galilee, it was reported to him that his mother and brethren were without asking that he should come out to them, for they regarded their kinsman as beside

himself (Matt. 12:46-50), but he refused. In his intense humanity-love he appeared to many of his generation as a madman (John 8:48; *c.f.* Hos. 9:7). Nor did he in his holy enthusiasm hesitate sternly to rebuke the prevailing sins of the day with an earnestness and intensity that reminds one of an Elijah risen from the dead (Luke 11:45 ff.; Matt. 15:6; 23:13 ff.). Jesus, too, suffered the fate of the prophet. Like the traditional Jeremiah, he wept for the sins of his people. He stood on Olivet and looked over the city and shed tears of patriotic devotion, exclaiming, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killeth the prophets and stoneth them that are sent unto her! how often would I have gathered her children together even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not" (Matt. 23:37; *c.f.* Jer. 13:27).

The ideal prophet, like many before him, perished in Jerusalem. The people had justly come under the condemnation which Stephen, a few years later, pronounced: "Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed them that showed before the coming of the Righteous One; of whom ye have now become betrayers and murderers; ye who received the law as it was ordained by angels and kept it not" (Acts 7:51 f.). The Lord's prediction concerning himself had been fulfilled: "It cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem" (Luke 13:33).